

The 8th workshop on interpretive consumer research,  
European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management,  
Edinburgh, United-Kingdom, April 16-17, 2015

## Listening to the home. The sonic reconfigurations of spatial boundaries.

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### Introduction

This article is part of an ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration between two academic scholars and a sound artist. The project's objective is to explore the interest of such collaboration for the performance of more critical, imaginative, and active research (Denzin 2001). This specific proposal is a conceptual investigation of the domestic space from a sonic perspective – a focus deriving from the group's interest in the performativity of sound. In particular, we argue that adopting a sonic-spatial perspective enables us to see, hear, imagine and conceptualize the unstable, dynamic, and porous qualities of space (Thrift 2006). We discuss sonic spatialities in relation to the domestic space and its conceptualization in the cultural consumption literature.

### Theoretical background

#### *Home in consumer culture theory*

Cultural consumption studies too often construe the domestic space of the home as an intangible, homogeneous, and transcendental quality that can apply not only to houses and apartments, but also to collective shelters (Hill and Stamey 1990), hotel rooms (Bardhi and Arnould 2006), or villages (Ger and Yenicioglu 2004). Home is a making. Through consumption (Holbrook 1987) and the ritualistic construction of symbolic and material boundaries (Ger and Yenicioglu 2004; Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012), the consumer transforms a neutral space into a safe and sacred haven, protected from exterior disorder, dirtiness, and profanation. This refuge is the privileged site for the definition of familial and personal identities, intimately binding the trajectories of the home and its dwellers (Mc Cracken 1989; Claiborne and Ozanne 1990).

Recently, the fragmentation, porosity, and fluidity of domestic spaces have garnered growing attention. Studies in both the Arab Gulf and the United-States have for example emphasized the gendered clustering of the home and the practices performing this spatial organization (Browne 2014, Sobh and Belk 2011). Concurrently, research on new communication and information technologies direct attention to the ways the market and workplace penetrate the sacred domestic haven (Venkatesh, Stolzoff, Shih, and Mazumba 2001). From these perspectives, the home is neither homogeneous nor strictly bounded. Its interior and exterior thresholds are constantly in the making,

ephemerally defined by the flows they interrupt or let through (Browne 2014). In this article, we argue that this fluidity and permeability are not so much the result of recent technological breakthrough or societal transformations. Rather, they are inherent to the ontological quality of space, and in particular of the sonically permeated space.

### *The spatial turn from a sonic perspective*

This perspective towards a more open, active, developing and plural conceptualization of the domestic space resonates with the scholarship that developed out of the spatial turn in social science (Crang and Thrift 2000; Thrift 2006). This turn engages a cross-disciplinary movement in broadening the scope of our theoretical and empirical imagination of space. It is *inter alia* an invitation to “unblock” space (Thrift 2009), to think it in terms of flows, paths, and movements rather than containers and discrete units. This unblocking, however, implies shaping new spaces of language and writing (Crang and Thrift 2000), thinking new ways of researching and performing space. As ideas of a constant formation, dissolution and reformation about space were getting more traction, the link to theories of sound became the center of a new research stream about the interconnections of space and sound.

Sound implies space, as a prerequisite and a consequence. The research on the interconnections of space and sound combines a variety of disciplines like soundscapes studies, auditory culture studies, ethnomusicology, aural architecture, geography and science and technology studies (for an overview see Born 2013). Research projects can range from the construction of political and religious space through the village bells in France (Corbin 1998) to the transformation of noise control into a private commodity by sound engineered private spaces in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson 2004, Bijsterveld 2008). What such projects all have in common is a focus on the perspectival and relational quality of sound. The sonic experience is concretized and embodied by a particular subject in specific physical and social locations, while reconfiguring the boundary permutations of these sonic spatialities (LaBelle 2010, Connor 1997). Conceptually, this sonic quality allows the researcher to go beyond a visual imagination towards a more fluid, mobile, and plural conception of space in becoming. The sonic-spatial nexus can then be understood as a constant recursive and nested set of assemblages (DeLanda 2006).

### [A sonic imagination of the domestic space\(s\)](#)

Focusing on the sonic-spatiality entices to acknowledge both the inward and outward permeability of the home. The home is a locus of constant sonic circulations blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior. Although abrupt intrusions are probably the most remarkable sign of this permeability (e.g. an apartment neighbor’s laughter in the night), outside sounds also inhabit the domestic space in more discreet ways. The distant droning of traffic in the city, the barking of dogs, the car alarm, the overexcited, singing pedestrians, the Sunday church bells, the Muezzin calling out for worshipping, the vocalization of joy or despair of a sports audience, the house party somewhere close; for who is willing (or have to) to listen, all these sounds are constant reminders of the home’s integration in broader socio-material assemblages.

Sound does not only penetrate the domestic space but also flows out of it (Augoyard and Torgue, 2005). Communication technologies can extend the home far beyond its walls. A phone call between relatives ephemerally connects and reconfigures two dwellings through the to-ing, fro-ing, and

superimposing of voices and background noises. The author Doctorow (2008: ix) describes how, being lonely in a Swiss hotel room, he connects via Skype with his girlfriend's bedroom in London "I was in Geneva and I was in London and I was in neither". They didn't say much, while also listening to music on their own, without being mixed into the mic. They were at the same time connected in several spaces, while being physically and sonically also in linked to other spaces.

Not all flows are as much controlled and intentional as phone calls, however. The domestic "vault" (Bardhi and Arnould 2006) is leaking with sounds; sounds of everyday life, sociality, and intimacy that inexorably bleed into other dwellings and public spaces. While such leakages frequently trigger conflicts over the proper delimitation and definition of public and private spaces, it also can contribute to the definition of a togetherness that transcends the strict family unit. In his meditations on the role of the bass in defining subcultural space, Muggs (2012) describes the overlap and coexisting sonic spatialities with the artists Rootas Manova. He grew up in a strict religious home on London, and sitting in his home he could listen to the reggae socialities in a nearby sports hall, fantasizing about the social, physical space while joining into the sonic space and singing along. As Muggs write (2012:13): "the bass has penetrated his house, his room, him; and his internal performance was still a part of sound system zone, physically linked to the dance."

These initial developments suggest that the home is not only permeable but is itself fluid. Its socio-materiality is open to constant transformations as dwellers and outsiders attend to their lives. The sonic performance of the domestic space direct attention to the subtle and radical reformulations the home undergoes. For example, the droning, loud, and pervading noise of a crowded party entices to rethink the fuzzy distinction between private dwelling and public space. On such occasion, the home ephemerally turns into a space of noisy hospitality, inviting otherness and disorder to dwell a space culturally construed, and sometimes experienced, as private, ordered, and quiet (Labelle 2010). Such spectacular reconfiguration should not mask more mundane and ongoing transformations of the domestic socio-materiality though. For the homeworker, the routine recession of morning noises (e.g. other dwellers' voices, bathroom gurgling, radio shows) can contribute to rearrange the home into a workplace, to transition away from more leisure or family-oriented performances of the domestic space. Studying home from a static perspective is therefore considering a specific configuration of the domestic space. The risk inherent to such congealing is to essentialize home, to turn a specific, localized, and ephemeral configuration into a permanent and transcendental convention, and to separate it from the lives of listeners and sounds involved in the performance of the domestic space.

Considering the positional circulation of sonic flows through the domestic space highlights the diversity and variability of home's meanings and experiences across classes, genders, and generations. It attracts attention to voices, sounds, and experiences that the naturalization of the home as a safe, sacred, and quiet haven tends to overlook. For the old, the housewife, or the unemployed, the home can transform into a place of solitary confinement where "quietness" becomes synonymous with "alienating silence." (DeNora 2000) In such contexts, sounds from the exterior (e.g. nursing aide knocking, phone call) can take on a liberating potential, offering a temporary reconnection with the other. To some dwellers, the home is a prison to escape rather than a haven to reach. As shown by an analysis of popular music (the sounds about the home and used in the home), this imprisonment can range from misogynist conceptions of the home as the space of conformity and domesticity, with the male "rebel"'s need for a wide open road (Reynolds,

Press 1995; Varney 2007) to a literal prison. By preventing the sounds of domestic abuse from leaking out, the material boundaries of the home (i.e. walls, distance from neighbors) can contribute to the perpetuation of violence and suffering. Furthermore, the systematic association of the “good home” with peace, quietness, and order is prone to combine the pains of abuse with the guilt and shame of not reaching an ideal of “homeyness.” From such a perspective, home, as a concept and materiality, can become an experience of silent, lonely, and sometimes deadly confinement.

### Sound is space, space is sound

Home is unstable. Its definition, performance, experience, and socio-materiality, what it sounds, looks, and feels like, are open to constant reconfigurations. Some of these transformations are drastic and spectacular, and other are more subtle, almost imperceptible in the mundane flow of everyday life. A sonic-spatial perspective suggests that any empirical, ethical, or conceptual delineation of home is necessarily punctual (Bajde 2013), congealing movements and intensities into an ephemerally bounded and discrete unit of space. Going with the flows of sound that make the home, following their movement, forms, and intensities, the ways they are performed and embodied, highlight the inherent malleability of the domestic space.

Adopting a sonic perspective on space is not merely resorting to a methodological gimmick, observing the world through a slightly different shade of tinted glasses. It is rather acknowledging that space is for hearing as much as it is for seeing. To go a step further, it also means a conceptual intertwining of sound and sight. If sound allows and urges alternative conceptualizations of space, it is that space itself is sonic. We believe our reflections on the home illustrate the diverse ways in which sound comes to weave space together in ephemeral and heterogeneous assemblages. They suggest an epistemological and ontological idiosyncrasy of the sonic space, a sonic spatiality enmeshed but not confounded with a more visual one.<sup>1</sup> This idiosyncrasy invites to make the spatial turn a sonic one, to consider not only new spaces of language and writing (Crang and Thrift 2000), but also new spaces of voices, noises, music, and sounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Our developments for example illustrate how a visually closed space surrounded by walls can be open to the inward and outward circulations of sounds.

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